

Chapter 5

Trails in North Carolina

North Carolina is blessed with some of the most significant, unique and scenic natural resources in the nation. From the splendor of the Blue Ridge Mountains to the rolling Piedmont to the scenic barrier islands on the Atlantic, the state has an abundance of natural treasures traversed by rivers and streams well-suited for the establishment of trails for the enjoyment of North Carolinians and its millions of visitors annually.

Many people use the terms trail and greenway interchangeably. Greenway systems provide sufficiently robust corridors of connected and continuous open space managed for conservation and recreation purposes. In many cases the width of a greenway is determined by available public land or easements, but ideally it should be informed by environmental and ecological systems-function criteria. They may follow natural land or water features, and may link nature preserves, parks, schools, businesses, neighborhoods, cultural features and historic sites. Trails are more narrow designated corridors, usually within parks, but also including abandoned railroad corridors, utility easements and or water features that provide recreational, aesthetic, alternate transportation or educational opportunities to both motorized and non-motorized users.



Trails on land and water throughout the state contribute to the overall quality of life and health of users by offering people attractive, safe, and accessible places to exercise, be outdoors and be part of a community. According to the National Association of State Park Directors, visitors view trails as one of the most important facilities in a state park. In terms of dollars spent on

public recreation in North Carolina, the development of trails has enjoyed a huge increase over the past decade. During the past five years, about a third of all of the state's Parks and Recreation Trust Fund matching grants to local governments have included funds for trail development or renovation.

The trails in North Carolina include national (such as the Appalachian Trail), state (such as the Mountains to Sea State Trail), regional (such as the Carolina Thread Trail) and local trails (such as the trail system at Charlotte's Reedy Creek Nature Preserve). These trails occur on public and private property, and are developed and maintained by both the public and private sectors. Trails may be paved, unpaved or water-based, and accommodate a variety of ages and users, including walkers, hikers, backpackers, joggers, bicyclists, mountain bikers, in-line skaters, horseback riders, paddlers, ATV/off-road vehicles, wheelchairs and other motorized devices for persons with disabilities.



As noted by the President's Commission of Americans Outdoors in 1986, "Trails and greenways have the potential to be this country's most important land-based initiative for conservation and recreation in the next several decades." This statement holds true in North Carolina as evidenced by the multitude of local, regional and statewide trails that have been developed in the last decade and/or are proposed for the near future.

Trails are positioned and well-suited to meet some of the most popular outdoor recreation activities and needs identified by North Carolinians. The 2014 public survey conducted for the North Carolina Outdoor Recreation Plan found eight trail-related activities were ranked in the top 35 outdoor recreation activities by respondents (Figure 5.1).

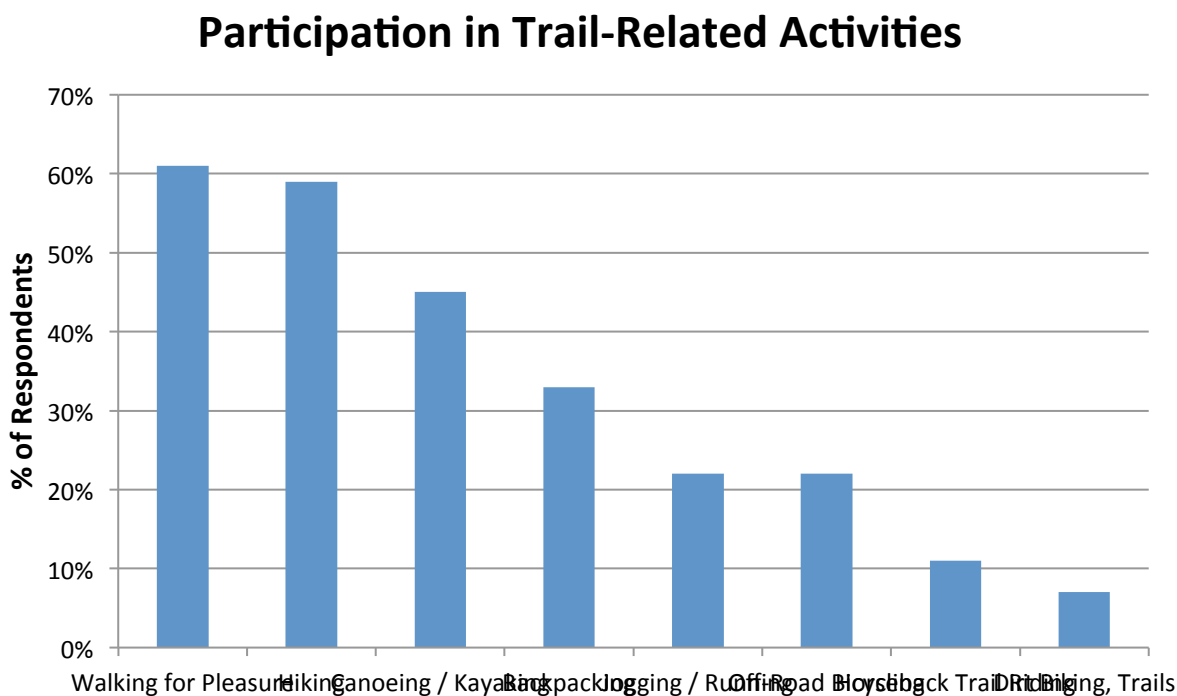


Figure 5.1 Participation in Trail Activities

Eighty-one percent (81%) of respondents found it was important for “local park/site” trails to connect to outdoor recreation opportunities; eighty-five percent (85%) for “state park/site” trails to connect and eighty-two percent (82%) for “federal park/site” trails to connect (Figure 5.2). Also, the public survey found forty-nine percent (49%) of respondents felt “providing local, regional and statewide trails” should be a top priority for outdoor recreation providers in the state.

The recreation provider’s survey conducted for the 2014 North Carolina Outdoor Recreation Plan found that fifty-three percent (53%) of local, state and federal providers found it difficult to meet the needs for off-street walking and biking paths. Also, 67 percent of recreation providers responded that it is important for trail linkages within their park system and 57% said that it’s important to link trails to other jurisdictions. The recreation providers listed the following trail-related facilities as most urgently needed in their park or park system: paved trails (31%), unpaved trails (29%), nature/interpretive trails (20%), and mountain bike trails (18%).

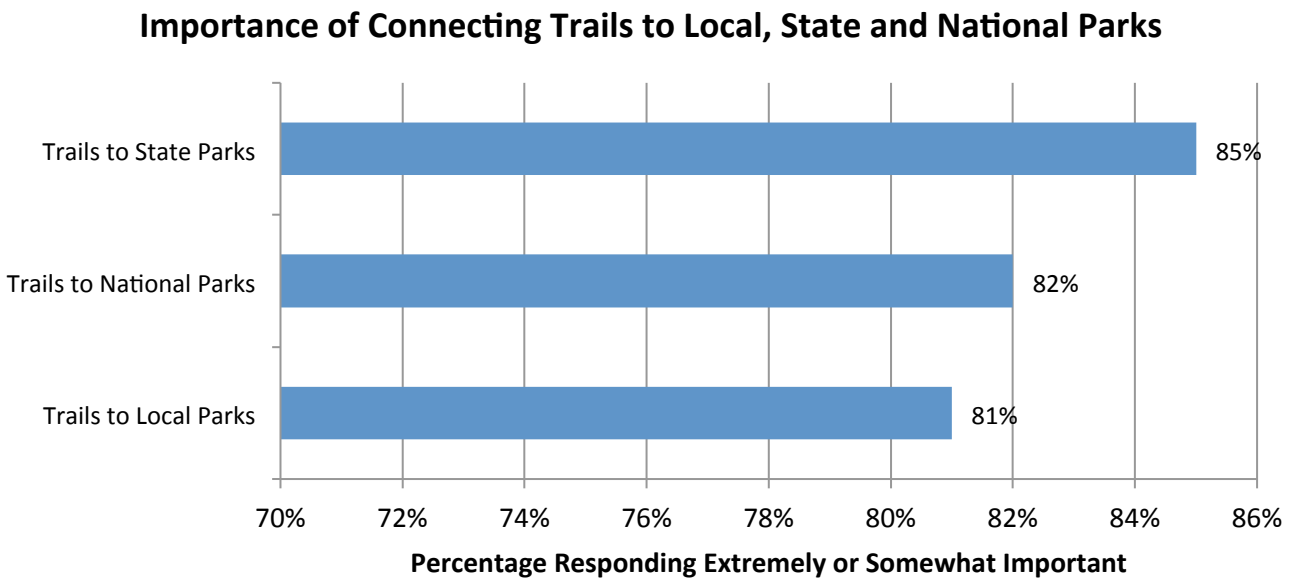


Figure 5.2 Importance of connecting trails to local, state and federal parks.

Benefits

Trails provide multiple benefits for individuals and communities that can positively affect the sustainability of local, regional and the state's economic, environmental and social health. These benefits are measurable and definable. The degree to which a particular type of benefit is realized depends largely upon the nature of the greenway or trail system being built and how accessible and well maintained it is. These benefits include:

- Alternative modes of transportation – trails offer an alternative mode of transportation for work, errands and recreation rather than using an automobile. Trails reduce road congestion and are less expensive to construct than roadways, allow residents to travel by bicycle or foot, save money on gas, car maintenance, and parking fees. Also, trails help reduce the emission of greenhouses gases along with the number of vehicle-bicyclist and vehicle-pedestrian related accidents. Studies have found that for every 1 mile pedaled rather than driven, emissions of carbon dioxide are reduced by nearly 1 pound. (Rails to Trails Conservancy (2005)



- Economic Impacts – Trails can create job opportunities in construction and repair and recreation business opportunities through rentals and sales (such as kayaks, canoes and bicycles) and recreation services (guided land and water tours). Trails also tend to increase proximate property values, increase local tax revenues, and attract tourists and tourist spending in the local economy. For example, the Shepard's Vineyard housing development in Apex added \$5,000 to the price of 40 new homes adjacent to the regional trail and these homes were still the first to sell. (Chuck Flink, 2014)

National studies demonstrate many companies seeking to relocate or establish a corporate headquarters have cited the availability of trails as a significant factor in their decision to choose one locale over another. In Morganton, the Catawba River Greenway was cited as an amenity that led to the town's designation as one of the 50 best small towns in the Southeast. It was also a factor in Caterpillar Corporation's choice of Morganton as the site for a new facility. (The News Herald, Morganton, 2014)

- Improving health and fitness – Trail systems contribute to the overall health of users by offering people attractive, safe, accessible places to exercise, and possibly to enjoy water-based trails. Trails can help reduce physical and mental health risks by providing pleasant places to exercise. This helps control weight, blood pressure and cholesterol levels, build strength and endurance, and helps prevent depression. (US Center for Disease Control, Physical Activity and Health, 2005)



The American Heart Association found for every \$1 spent on biking and walking trails, approximately \$3 in medical expenses can be saved. Recent studies found that two-thirds (66%) of adults and one-third (33%) of children living in NC are obese or overweight. In addition, the President's Council on Fitness and Sports noted, "Parks with

paved trails were almost 27 times more likely to be used for physical activity than parks without trails.” The Outdoor Foundation’s 2013 Outdoor Participation Report found running, including jogging and trail running, is the most popular activity among Americans when measured by number of participants and by number of total annual outings.

- Environmental protection – Trail corridors provide a multitude of environmental benefits which help protect the essential functions performed by natural ecosystems (clean air, clean water and wildlife protection) across the state. Trail corridors protect important habitats and provide green corridors for people and wildlife. Trail corridors help improve air and water quality. By protecting land along rivers, streams and lakes, trail corridors prevent soil erosion and filter pollution caused by agricultural use and urban/road runoff. Trail corridors serve as natural floodplains and encourage water table recharge.



According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, flooding causes over \$ 1 billion in property damages every year. By restoring floodplains that are developed to their natural state, many riverside communities are preventing potential flood damage. Trail corridors help to preserve habitats for many plants, insects and animals that are important and maybe unique to the region.

- Connecting communities – The great appeal of trails lies in the concept of connectivity. Trails multiply the benefits of conservation areas, parks and open spaces by linking them together. Trails often serve as walking and bicycling routes to work, school, local businesses, restaurants, parks and recreation areas. They can be used to conserve historic and cultural resources such as archaeological and historic sites. Trails provide places for visitors and residents to exercise and experience the many natural and cultural wonders of North Carolina.

Many sources cite trails as “America’s New Main Street” where neighbors meet, children play and community groups connect and celebrate. Trails can provide a sense of place and community pride for an area or region. According to national surveys by the Federal Highway Administration, Americans are willing to walk as far as 2 miles to a destination, and bike as far as 5 miles. (Rails to Trails Conservancy, 2008) Trail systems can also connect to other municipal/county trails and parks and with major regional and/or statewide trails.

- Environment education –Richard Louv’s 2005 book, “Last Child in the Woods” notes that the majority of this generation’s children have “nature deficit disorder”. They have missed the chance to interact and bond with nature and the next generation of adults may neither know nor care about such things as the environment, biodiversity or sustainability. Louv cites extensive research showing that unstructured play in nature is essential for a child’s healthy physical and emotional development.



Trails can offer a safe place for our children to play outside with others from the community and create awareness of each other, as well as the natural and cultural world. They offer close- to-home environmental education opportunities for both children and adults to learn about native plants and animals, while rediscovering North Carolina's ecosystems and ecological processes. Trails provide excellent areas for hands-on school field trips.



Some trail related issues facing North Carolina over the next 10 years include:

- Meeting the needs of a growing population by providing more trails and improving access and connectivity to existing trails.
- Improving the attractiveness and usefulness of trails by developing better trail signs and directions, locating trails where people live, increased ADA accessibility, and better trail maintenance.
- As trail use increases, conflict between users groups will increase. All levels of recreation providers will need to open channels for better communication and coordination while trying to address safety and liability issues through improved management and enforcement and reduce trail user conflicts.
- Increased development pressure from the state's increasing population will reduce the availability of lands for trails.

- Improving trail safety through better site planning, design, maintenance, rules and regulations, lighting, signage, safety programs, law enforcement and patrol and community watch programs.